

Modelling the Middle East

The Gulf region, led by Dubai, is still the poster child for architectural development in key emerging markets, but concerns are being voiced over how fast-track construction is leaving cultural sustainability lagging

In such a fast-developing region, it's a tall order for buildings to meet cultural, geographical, societal and sustainable goals. **Dr. George Katodrytis, associate professor,** American University of Sharjah, and 2008 Cityscape Architectural Awards judge, agrees. "Fast-developing cities in the Gulf create architecture firsts – which can be constructed quickly – and generate culture afterwards. This is what is happening in Dubai

"The only problem is that most of these buildings are for real estate consumption and have little or no interest in collective and urban cultural activities. In terms of the geographic landscape, the apparent abundance of land and sea creates an unusual urban condition, that of designing without context. As such, there is little to relate other than the ground and horizon.

"Here, profile does not matter but rather a vertical and tectonic landscape of form and variation. I wish that most of the buildings in the region would establish a stronger relationship to the ground rather than just 'sit' on it."

Dr. Suha Özkan, founding chairman of the World Architecture Community and fellow judge for Architecture and 2008 Cityscape Architectural Awards judge points out that it is important to remember that construction development in the Middle East, especially in the Gulf, is *sui generis* by nature.

"In the 1970s most of the major buildings in the Western world were constructed. To protect and project the qualities of urban life were more important than new buildings. Whereas, countries with new-found wealth [such as oil] necessitated the creation of new buildings, a new workforce and new urban environments.

"At the outset, the living examples of what was accomplished in the West was the guidance. For decades, to create Texas in the Gulf was the ambition. This ambition was realised at the cost of the loss of cultural values and the traditional and historic environment."

An emerging theme prevalent across the region, and in direct contrast to skyscraper syndrome, according to Katodrytis, is the "historic thematic reinvention of the past, which is not even local, but rather an iconic and simplified Orientalist nostalgia."

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Katodrytis also picks up on environmental sustainability in the region, saying: "What may be dangerous is the adoption of a set of generic formulas for sustainability which architects can use or not, rather like buying a car with extra accessories. We need to see buildings with real sustainable design and applied principles."

"We have to wait and see," adds Özkan. "There are many projects that [are] claiming to consume 'zero' energy."

As regards form meeting function, for Katodrytis it's not a positive progression, as he explains: "[Nowadays] buildings seem to relate more to the sky than to their context or function. Function is not fixed but can easily change with changing market needs. Form sells faster as it can make one building different from another, and it has completely detached itself from function.

"Office towers look like residential towers, which look like hotels and so on. This makes the city repetitive."

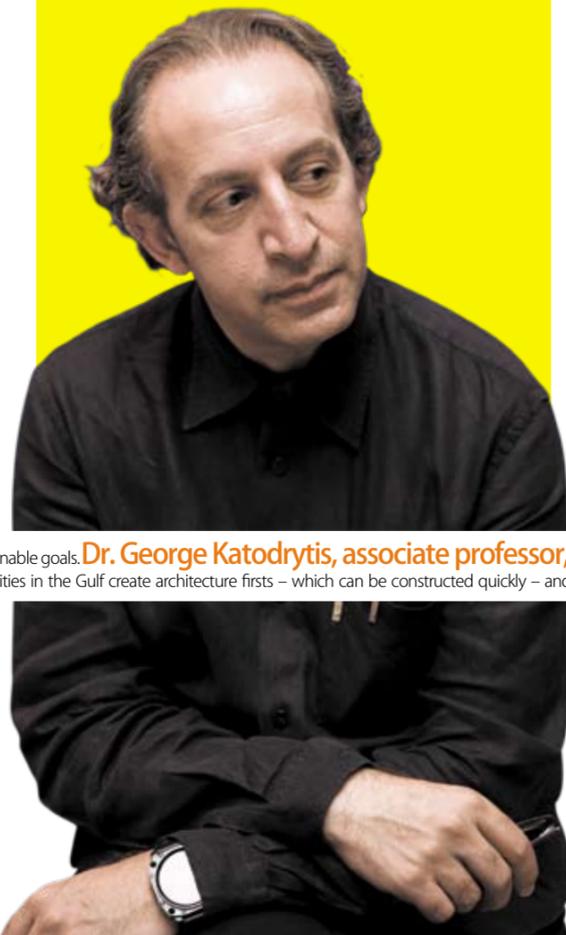
But, says Özkan, the next wave of new builds holds more promise. "After the 1990s, a new generation of clients with visionary aspirations emerged. They are not only targeting the provision of spaces but also want to create masterpieces.

"The new century witnessed almost all major [architectural] practices working on projects in the Gulf. And the Gulf and China are currently the two main areas where contemporary architectural practices find the right economic and political environment in which to emerge."

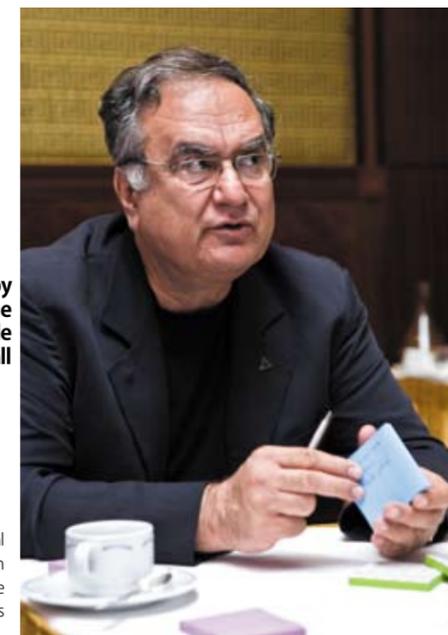
Katodrytis believes that, right now, Dubai is still the poster child for the region's development. "As long as the priority is the real estate market, developments will continue to be products for sale only. Will Doha or Abu Dhabi emerge as the alternative cities? For the moment, Dubai's success is the only model to imitate."

However, Özkan is less complimentary. "Established cities like Istanbul and Cairo have a magnetic existence. The growing cities in the Gulf are emerging with a different energy. The problem is not lagging behind, but the lack of vision of a new urbanisation.

"The quality of the urban environment is a product of city master plans. In almost all cities there are parks and open spaces. However, the problem here is that cities have been designed for motor vehicles. There is almost no free



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and comfortable circulation spaces for pedestrians who are only accommodated in shopping malls. The souks and narrow streets that created all those wonderful medinas seems to have been forgotten."

Nevertheless, both agree that this is still an exciting part of the world to be practising in. "At the moment, Dubai seems to be the destination for architects and practices from around the globe to experiment. Everything you do here has a world audience," says Katodrytis. He goes on to cite ethical responsibility as the main challenge for architects working in this region.

Özkan elaborates: "Architects are normally employed for their projects and talent. However, presently, the pressing issues of energy, climate, resources and sustainability cannot be ignored. The abundance of available resources and the sustainable architecture movement is the ethical issue that challenges every architect and client."

He also gives the example of Gordon Bunschaft's National Commercial Bank in Jeddah and Omrania's Tuwaiq Palace in Riyadh as examples of buildings where courtyard and oasis components are included in the built form, making them uncompromising examples of contemporary architecture.

But that trend is not, as yet, translating into bricks and mortar argues Katodrytis. "There is increased awareness and concern for sustainability, which is a move in the right direction. It is not yet an expectation though.

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The development of young architectural talent in the region isn't top of the development industry agenda as yet, but Katodrytis is sanguine about the opportunities for newly qualified architects. "Not much is being done, but young architects don't really mind as there is so much they can do. Our graduates from the American University of Sharjah are employed almost overnight.

"There is always the danger that they mature too early in a commercial environment, but at least they are employable."

This year's Cityscape Architectural Awards has also introduced a Young Architect Award category for the 2008 programme.

The future of architectural practice in the Middle East is still on an upswing according to Katodrytis. "A few years ago I wrote in a local magazine that Dubai is emerging as the prototype city of the 21st century in the form of architectural fantasy. It's doing now what Rome did in the 19th century and New York in the 20th."

"But we need to introduce layers, informal spaces and areas for planned and unplanned encounters as well as make hybrid urban quarters, create some chaos and encourage street culture."

"The Middle East is the epicentre of architecture.

There are good and bad architectural examples and that's normal. Quality is improving and major contributions to contemporary architecture are taking place here," concludes Özkan.

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